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ABSTRACT

A number of psychological models may explain why people vary in their satisfaction with various life domains (e.g., family, or grades). Six of the models are: (1) positive affect (the degree to which one experiences joy or happiness in each life domain); (2) negative affect (unpleasant emotions associated with domains); (3) social comparison (how one compares with others); (4) aspirations; (5) change (conditions which improve or deteriorate); and (6) objective factors (measurable external circumstances). To examine and compare the interaction and impact of these factors on satisfaction judgments, college undergraduates (N=149) completed a questionnaire assessing satisfaction in 11 life domains (friends, love life, grades, courses, recreation, standard of living, religion, future career, housing, and physical attractivenesss) and rated these domains according to the six models. Statistical analyses showed that social comparison and positive affect strongly predicted satisfaction across most domains. Satisfaction with love life correlated highly with overall life satisfaction, whereas satisfaction with friends was a poor predictor of global life satisfaction. In general, the results indicate that objective factors are often poor predictors of subjective well-being. (WAS)

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Factors Predicting Satisfaction Judgments:

A Comparative Examination

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Abstract

Satisfaction with 11 life domains (e.g. family, housing, love life) were correlated with a number of predictors (e.g. social comparison, positive and negative affect, aspirations). Satisfaction with the specific domains was also correlated with overall life satisfaction. Social comparison and positive affect were strong predictors of satisfaction across most domains. Satisfaction with love life was correlated highly with overall life satisfaction, whereas satisfaction with friends was a poor predictor of global life satisfaction. Limitations of the present study are discussed and suggestions for future research are offered.

Factors Predicting Satisfaction Judgments:

A Comparative Examination

In research on subjective well-being, three relatively independent factors emerge: positive affect, negative affect, and satisfaction (Andrews & Withey, 1976). A number of psychological models have been proposed to explain why people vary in their satisfaction with various life domains (e.g. family, grades). However, these models have rarely been empirically tested against one another. In this study six such models were examined and compared in order to understand their interaction and impact upon satisfaction judgments. The six models can be briefly described.

1. Positive affect--the degree to which one experiences joy, happiness, etc., in each life domain. Although it appears that life satisfaction and positive affect should be highly correlated, Andrews and Withey (1976) found that they loaded on different factors. Cameron (1975) presents evidence to show that affect is involved in appraisal of life satisfaction.

2. Negative affect--unpleasant emotions which are associated with the domains. One may be satisfied or dissatisfied with a domain based mainly upon the emotions one experiences in reference to it. Warr, Barter, & Brownbridge (1983) and Diener & Emmons (1982) indicate that positive and negative affect are independent. Thus, we wanted to examine their separate influence as well as their joint contribution to satisfaction. In addition, we wanted to discover how they relate within specific life domains.

3. Social comparison--how the person compares to proximal others in the domain. One may be satisfied as long as one is doing better than comparison others (Freedman, 1978).

4. Aspirations--having high hopes and desires in an area. A number of researchers (e.g. Fordyce, 1972) have theorized that high aspirations are impediments to satisfaction.

5. Change--conditions have recently improved or deteriorated. Adaptation theorists (e.g. Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978) maintain that only recent changes can move satisfaction away from the neutral point. Thus, recent change could lead to happiness or unhappiness. However, it could be that recent change most influences affect, whereas social comparison is a critical component for satisfaction. Brickman et. al report that lottery winners were no happier than nonwinners, and took less pleasure in mundane activities. Apparently these individuals had habituated to their windfall.

6. Objective factors--measurable external circumstances. Factors such as number of dates or actual income may directly lead to satisfaction with a domain. Some psychologists maintain that objective circumstances usually have little relation to happiness, which they suggest is controlled by internal psychological processes. These theorists maintain that processes such as adaptation mean that even when people live in favorable circumstances, they will adapt to them or their aspirations will rise, and therefore the circumstances will not lead to long term satisfaction.

The present study has several purposes. One purpose is to examine

the relative contributions of each of the hypothesized psychological models to judgments of satisfaction with various life domains. A second purpose is to assess the importance of satisfaction in each life domain in judgments of global life satisfaction, and to examine which specific domains are the best predictors of overall life satisfaction. A third purpose is to determine whether satisfaction with different domains are better predictors of overall life satisfaction in different populations.

Method

Subjects were 149 University of Illinois undergraduates participating in order to fulfill an introductory psychology requirement. They were administered a questionnaire assessing their satisfaction in 11 life domains: friends, love life, grades, courses, recreation, family, standard of living, religion, future career, housing arrangement, and physical attractiveness. They were asked to rate how satisfied they presently were with each of these areas on a scale ranging from 0 (extremely dissatisfied) to six (extremely satisfied). In order to assess positive and negative affect in each area, subjects were asked to rate to what extent each area contributes to their positive emotions (e.g. joy) on a six point scale ranging from "not at all" to "extremely". Similarly, they were asked to rate the degree to which each domain created negative or unpleasant emotions for them. For the comparison model, subjects were asked to compare themselves to the average college student in each area on a six point scale, ranging from "much worse off than they" to "much better off than they". In order to

assess aspirations, subjects were asked to indicate how high their hopes or aspirations are in each area on a six point scale from "extremely lower than average" to "extremely higher than average". To measure recent change, subjects rated the extent of positive or negative change recently experienced (within the last semester) on a six point scale from "much worse recently" to "much better recently". Objective measures of each domain were obtained as follows--friends: number of close friends plus number of confidantes; love life: presence or absence of boyfriend/ girlfriend plus number of dates per month; grades: current plus expected grade point average; recreation: number of social events attended per week plus frequency of participation in sports each week; family: whether parents are married or divorced, frequency of family gatherings, and number of brothers and sisters; future career: how rewarding is career choice plus how good are chances for getting into chosen field; religion: frequency of religious service attendance. For standard of living, the following variables were summed: status of parent's occupation, annual income of both parents, amount of available spending money, money problems, and financing of education. A total objective score was obtained by summing the objective measures of religion, love life, grades, recreation, family, future career, and standard of living. Objective measures of courses, housing arrangement, and physical attactiveness were not obtained. Subjects also completed a ten item measure of general life satisfaction (alpha= .90). An example item from this scale is "I am satisfied with the current state of affairs in my life". The questionnaires were completed in a group setting.

Another sample of 34 adults from the local community were administered a modified version of the domain satisfaction questionnaire used in the college sample. For obvious reasons the domains of grades, courses, and future career were dropped and health and work were added. Instead of the ten item measure of general life satisfaction, these subjects were asked two questions on two separate occasions, one month apart. These questions were: "How satisfied do you feel about your life as a whole" and "How much would you like to change your life as it is now". Both questions were answered on an 11 point scale anchored with "satisfied" and unsatisfied" for the former question and "not at all" to "a great deal" for the latter question. The two occasions were summed to provide a measure of global life satisfaction.

Results and Discussion

First, we computed the mean level of satisfaction in each domain for both the college and the community samples. These values are shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

In both samples, people are most satisfied with family and friends and are least satisfied with love life and physical attractiveness. Summing across domains, the community sample were as a group more satisfied than the college sample (4.38 vs. 3.92) though this is not a significant

difference. This finding is compatible with those of Campbell et. al (1976) who report that overall life satisfaction shows a tendency to increase with advancing age.

Table 2 shows the correlations between the objective measures of well-being and three measures of subjective well-being.

Insert Table 2 about here

Several conclusions can be drawn from this table. First, objective factors often do not correlate substantially with subjective well-being. In keeping with this finding, Kammann and Campbell (1982) argue that happiness is largely internally caused and is not due to external life circumstances. They suggest that this could be due to adaptation. However, our results suggest that objective factors can be significant predictors of subjective well-being, and in some cases (e.g. love life) quite substantial predictors. Rather than debate whether external circumstances can influence subjective well-being, a more profitable approach would be to determine when they do and when they do not. It is intriguing that students' objective grade point average had virtually no influence on their satisfaction with their grades. This is surprising given the quantified nature of grades, and the importance attached to them. However, whether a person had a boyfriend or girlfriend and the frequency of dating were strong predictors of satisfaction with love life. The last thing that should be noted is that no objective factor

correlated substantially with negative affect. This finding supports the conjecture of Diener, Larsen, and Emmons (1982) that negative affect may be more strongly influenced by long term person varaibles than by objective events or circumstances.

In Table 3 we present results which address the question of whether distinct domains are more or less important for different groups. The findings of Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers (1976) support the seemingly sensible conclusion that specific factors are differentially important to the subjective well-being of different groups. This conclusion seems sensible because different groups will experience different degrees of variation on specific factors and also because it would seem that different groups value different things. In Table 3 are the correlations for each subject sample between satisfaction with each domain and overall life satisfaction.

Insert Table 3 about here

Most domains support this conclusion since they correlate significantly with life satisfaction for one group but not for the other. However, satisfaction with love life is a significant predictor across both groups. It is surprising that satisfaction with friends correlates with life satisfaction at such a low level. In general, these findings are quite similar to those of Campbell (1981) who reports that satisfaction with self, standard of living, family, and marriage are most highly

correlated with satisfaction with life in general, while friends, housing, education, and health shared less variance with overall life satisfaction. Future research should try to uncover what predictors are generalized across most groups and determine the processes underlying these. Although most variables may not be generalizable from group to group, a few might be based on universal human characteristics and thus have widespread generality.

The next question addressed was the degree of relationship between several types of subjective well-being. Measures of satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect were correlated with each domain within each domain. The top portion of Table 4 shows the average of these correlationss (using *r* to *z* transformations) across all 11 domains.

Insert Table 4 about here

As can be seen, positive and negative affect show only a modest inverse correlation, supporting Bradburn's (1969) contention that positive and negative affect may be controlled by different processes. What this relatively low correlation indicates is that the amount of negative affect a person experiences in a particular domain is not usually strongly inversely related to the amount of positive affect associated with that domain. In contrast, satisfaction is more strongly related to both types of affect. This suggests that satisfaction may be a

summative variable (like global happiness ratings) in which persons mentally combine the positive and negative aspects in forming this judgment.

In the lower portion of Table 4 are shown the average correlations between the subjective well-being criterion variables and the possible contributing factors. As can be seen, negative affect cannot be predicted as well as can positive affect and satisfaction. In support of this conclusion are the findings of a multiple regression analysis conducted on the summed scores across all domains for each variable. The three possible contributing factors predicted summed positive affect and summed satisfaction each with a multiple squared correlation of .54, but negative affect could not be predicted (R^2 = .02). Thus, our three variables are not able to predict negative affect. This once again dovetails with the findings of Diener, Larsen, and Emmons (1982) which show that negative affect is less due to situational factors and more due to long term person factors. The present findings suggest that negative affect may be less related to certain conscious cognitive processes such as social comparison. The findings presented in Table 2 suggest that objective factors are less related to negative affect. It certainly seems clear that negative affect is controlled by different factors from the other two variables. The negative affect measure had sufficient dispersion so that restriction of range could not be responsible for the lower correlation found with this variable.

In the bottom portion of Table 4 one can also see that social comparison is the strongest correlate with the subjective well-being

measures. Indeed, social comparison tended to correlate as nigh with these measures as they did with each other. A partial correlation analysis also supported the idea that social comparison contributed the most unique variance to the subjective well-being variables. The partial correlations between summed satisfaction and each potential contributing factor (summed across domains) with the other two partialled out were as follows: social comparison = .47, aspirations = .29, change = -.05. It is interesting that the domains in which people are least satisfied (love life and physical attractiveness) are best predicted by social comparison. It appears that although people are least satisfied with these areas, they still perceive themselves as better off than others.

The results presented in Table 5 confirm the importance of social comparison as a predictor. Satisfaction within each domain was predicted by all six of the other models. In several cases there were only five predictors since we had no objective measure of well-being in that domain.

Insert Table 5 about here

The bottom line reveals that social comparison was the best predictor of summed satisfaction. However, one can note that in several domains social comparison had little impact upon satisfaction, whereas in others it was quite strong. One topic for future research is to

uncover the direction of influence between social comparison and subjective well-being. It is plausible that in some cases a feeling of well-being leads to high social comparison estimates; in other cases the influence may occur in the other direction, and frequently the influence may be bidirectional. As can be seen in Table 5, aspirations, change, and objective factors are not good predictors of satisafaction when affect is included as a predictor.

General Conclusions

There are several limits to the present study. Perhaps most obvious is the narrowness of our sample. Second, it is difficult to identify underlying theoretical processes based solely on cross-sectional correlational statistics. Keeping these limitations in mind, the conclusions that can be drawn from this study are:

1. Objective factors are often poor predictors of subjective well-being, within domains, but this is not always the case (e.g. love life). However, it is clear that subjective well-being can usually only be accounted for at a very weak level by the objective conditions in people's lives.

2. Although the correlates of subjective well-being for our two different samples were quite different, satisfaction with love life correlated substantially with life satisfaction in both samples, demonstrating the prepotence of this domain in judgments of global life satisfaction.

3. There are a number of reasons to believe that negative affect

measures are controlled by different processes from those that influence positive affect and satisfaction, given their independence and their differential correlates found in this study.

4. Social comparison and positive affect experienced in each domain are strong predictors of subjective well-being across most domains.

A number of questions, however, remain unanswered. For example, in considering when social comparison can and cannot predict satisfaction, the relevant comparison group needs to be specified. Exactly who people are comparing themselves to no doubt mediates their subjective sense of psychological well-being. Also, since social comparison theory predicts satisfaction in many domains, it would be profitable to explain why it fails to predict in certain domains, such as housing or courses. Freedman (1978) speculates that comparison theory holds for goals set by society, such as money, success, and social recognition. It is thus surprising that comparison theory does not predict satisfaction with standard of living more strongly than it does and that it does predict satisfaction with friends and love life as strongly as it does. An alternative explanation would be that comparison theory predicts satisfaction in subjectively salient and important domains, thus accounting for our finding that comparison theory predicts satisfaction with love life, friends, and physical attractiveness, three extremely salient domains for college students. It may be that aspirations best predict satisfaction for domains in which there are goals set by society. In support of this conjecture, we found that aspirations best predicted (negatively) satisfaction with standard of living.

Finally, other possible contributors to subjective well-being need to be considered. For example, the discrepancy between our aspirations and where we perceive ourselves to be relevant to them is a probable predictor of satisfaction (Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976). Future research should be aimed at addressing these issues in order to clarify the relationship between objective conditions and the psychological experience of subjective well-being.

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Table 1

Mean Ratings of Satisfaction

With Each Domain

Domain	College Sample	Community Sample
Friends	4.63	4.87
Love Life	3.15	3.71
Family	4.86	4.73
Recreation	3.81	4.13
Housing	3.99	4.45
Standard of Living	4.03	4.70
Religion	4.03	4.48
Physical Attractiveness	3.91	4.06
Health		4.32
Courses	3.61	
Grades	3.35	
Future Career	3.79	
$\bar{X}$	3.92	4.38
N	149	31

Table 2

Objective Predictors of

Subjective Well-Being

Domain	Life Satisfaction	Positive Affect	Negative Affect
Friends	.09	.28**	-.06
Love Life	.59**a	.53**a	-.23*b
Family Life	.18*	.19*	-.09
Recreation	.32**	.30**	-.01
Standard of Living	.29**x	.31**x	-.08y
Grades	.15	.06	-.16*

Note. See text for explanations of variables.

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$.

Differences between correlations in some row (different subscript is significantly different): xyz $p < .05$, abc $p < .01$.

Table 3

Pearson Correlations Between Life Satisfaction and Satisfaction with Each Domain

Domain	College Sample	Community Sample
Friends	.09	.25
Love Life	.49**	.48**
Family(a)	.46**	.06
Recreation(a)	.46**	.11
Housing	.13*	.38*
Standard of Living(a)	.49**	.11
Religion	.21*	.34*
Physical Attractiveness	.37**	.10
Health		.26
Courses	.08	
Grades	.38**	
Future Career	.29**	

Note. *p<.05, **p<.01

(a) designates correlations which differ significantly at p<.05.

Table 4

Average Pearson Correlations Across All Domains of Predictors and Subjective Well-Being Variables

Subjective Well-Being Variables	PA	NA	SAT			
Positive Affect						
Negative Affect	-.29					
Satisfaction	.64	-.50				
Predictors				SC	ASP	CHG
Social Comparison	.54	-.39	.64		.50	.45
Aspirations	.43	-.11	.30			.23
Change	.39	-.32	.50			

Note. PA= Positive Affect NA= Negative Affect SAT= Satisfaction SC= Social Comparison ASP= Aspirations CHG= Change N= 149

Table 5

Standardized Betas for Predicting Satisfaction with Domains

Domain	Pos. Aff.	Neg. Aff.	Comp.	Aspir.	Change	Objective
Friends	.15*	-.25**	.46**	-.04	.14*	.09
Love Life	.19*	-.14**	.57**	-.11**	.14**	.10
Family	.43**	-.26**	.29**	-.12	.08	.01
Recreation	.32**	-.19**	.34**	-.13	.12	.16*
Housing	.50**	-.35**	.15*	-.06	.00	
Standard of Living	.42**	-.26**	.27**	-.24**	.06	.03
Religion	.38**	-.22**	.25**	.04	.06	-.06
Physical Attractiveness	.30**	-.25**	.39**	.00	.03	
Courses	.37**	-.12	.07	.00	.24**	
Grades	.27**	-.31**	.25**	-.02	.19**	.09
Future Career	.41**	-.15**	.31**	-.11	.18**	.10
Sum Across Domains	.40**	-.21**	.49**	-.18**	.03	.09

Note. Pos. Aff.= Positive Affect Neg. Aff.= Negative Affect
Comp.= Comparison Aspir.= Aspirations
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$.